

Chasing History

One trait shared by the greatest athletes in all sports is a sense of historical perspective

The question of who is the “greatest athlete of all time” is a debate that’s familiar to all sports fans. The analysis is not always as complicated as people tend to make it. Two events this summer illustrated this: Tiger Woods’ 12th career major victory at the PGA Championship and Roger Federer’s eighth career Grand Slam title at Wimbledon.

It is often said that it’s difficult to compare athletes from different generations. But one trait that all the “greatest of all time” athletes on my list seem to share is an understanding of history—knowing which measurements of greatness stand the test of time, rather than simply reflecting contemporary standards. Golf equipment, courses and compensation have changed. Tennis equipment, styles and surfaces have changed. But the Grand Slam benchmark has remained constant. Woods and Federer understand that.

Has any athlete ever been more public in chasing the holy grail of his sport—Jack Nicklaus’ 18 major championships—than Woods? Perhaps Ted Williams, who’s goal was to have people say about him, “There goes the greatest hitter who ever lived.” He knew that to be regarded as such he would have to achieve the perfect balance between hitting for average and power. Babe Ruth had a more singular sense of history when he hit his 60th home run in 1927. “Sixty,” he said. “Let some other S.O.B. match that.”

Professional athletes are motivated by many things—money, fame, next year’s contract, which team they play for. There are those who can make a conscious choice between money or a chance for championships. Those who choose the latter are much more inclined to secure their place in history.

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by Bob Latham

Jordan. While he could win an almost unlimited number of season scoring championships (he won 10) it wasn’t until he won his sixth team championship, passing Magic Johnson, that he knew he had secured his place as the greatest of all time. If only he had left us with that indelible image of the winning shot against Utah in 1998—sparing us the sight of him in a Wizards uniform—his legacy would have been more intact. For a man with such a sense of history, he succumbed to con-

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temporary temptations. So while we can place him on top of the basketball pedestal, there is something lacking when we compare him with Ted Williams, who homered in his last at bat, or Rocky Marciano, who retired 49-0. The greatest usually seem to know how to go out on top.

Muhammad Ali, the self-proclaimed “greatest of all time,” diminished his legacy by not retiring immediately after the “Thrilla in Manila” in 1975, risking ceding the historical title to Marciano. Ali seemed to be seduced more by the respect he had long sought and been denied—as well as a depleted field of heavyweights after he had vanquished George Foreman and Joe Frazier—and ignored his sense of history. Jim Brown did not make any such mistake. The record for career rushing yards (currently held by Emmitt Smith) will be broken again. But is anyone else likely to lead the NFL in rushing eight of the nine years he is in the league, as Jim Brown did?

Lance Armstrong knew that his sport’s Mount Olympus was the Tour de France. He didn’t chase Eddie Mer-

ckx’ records in other cycling events, or even other individual tour records (most yellow jerseys, most stage titles). He went for the top spot in victories, breaking the record with his sixth title and putting it out of reach with his seventh. With this singular focus, did he pass Merckx as the greatest cyclist of all time? Perhaps, but without it he would not be close.

Some athletes have tried to invent a category to declare their historical significance, which tends to relegate an athlete to his or her own time. In 1988, José Canseco confused a statistical achievement with a place in history by declaring himself the first member of the 40/40 club—stealing 40 bases and hitting 40 home runs in a season. This prompted Mickey Mantle to retort, “If I had known it would be such a big deal, I would have done it myself.”

Tiger’s greatest contemporary rival, Phil Mickelson, does not play with the same sense of history. In Federer’s sport, a man who is playing his last grand slam tournament this month, Andre Agassi, might have put himself into the bar discussion among the greatest tennis players of all time if he’d only realized earlier that the true measure between generations was victories in majors. He even skipped Wimbledon for three years, before it became his first major title in 1992, being motivated instead by his contemporary image.

Having a sense of history in order to be the greatest may not apply to horse racing, of course. Did Secretariat know that he needed to win the Belmont by 31 lengths in 1973 to stake his claim as the greatest racehorse ever? Probably not. But for those of us with two legs and the capacity for abstract thought, if you want to be the greatest of all time, you’d better be able to see outside the confines of your own generation. ■

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